

PARSHAS VAYECHI - PICK AN ANGEL

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Pick An Angel¹

G-d Who shepherds me from my inception until this day: may the angel who redeems me from all evil bless the lads...

Who was this angel? Did Yaakov really beseech its assistance - in violation of every Jewish sensibility that demands that we never pray to anyone of anything other than Hashem Himself?

Yaakov did not pray to an angel. He did not entreat some heavenly figure to shower his grandchildren with blessing. We turn in prayer to Hashem alone; we do not admit to any other object of veneration. Praying to an angel would be all the more objectionable after beginning a prayer with a reference to Hashem Himself, as Yaakov does here!

We will unravel this mystery only if we first understand the two elements in Yaakov's prayer. He speaks of sustenance, of Hashem "shepherding" him, giving him what he needs just as a shepherd leads his flock to the pasture land and the water they need. Yaakov also speaks of redemption, of deliverance from destructive forces that rise against him.

Our first instinct is to assume that redemption means critical intervention at moments of extreme urgency. For most people, those moments are few and far between - a handful or two in a lifetime.

Chazal thought differently. R. Eliezer^[2] reasons that by bringing these two themes together in Yaakov's tefilah, the Torah implies a strong comparison between them. Redemption is wondrous and miraculous. Therefore, says R. Eliezer, we must know that parnasah, sustenance, is miraculous as well. Furthermore, not a day goes by in which we are not given parnasah. We must therefore conclude that Yaakov refers to a redemptive deliverance that is also continuous and ever-present.

Neither parnasah nor geulah comes "simply" through laws of Nature, fixed into the fabric of Creation. Both, rather, come about through hashgachah, through Hashem's special providence over the lives of individuals.

It is easy to see this in reference to parnasah. In a brutally competitive world that does not stop to ask questions about right and wrong, the parnasah of the honest citizen is indeed miraculous. Only a miracle can account for the food that a person of sterling character, of integrity and scruples, manages to put on his table. It is indeed a gift from G-d each day.

More subtly, his survival each day is also miraculous. So very much can go wrong! So many pitfalls, so many kinds of physical and social evils threaten to overcome and overwhelm him! Only Hashem's geulah, His redemptive deliverance, allow him to survive. (Chazal remark that it is to our advantage that we cannot see the myriad mazikim, demonic forces, which physically surround us. This is certainly true in the social world as well. We would lose our sanity if we had to worry about all that we could reasonably worry about! We live in blissful ignorance of all the hazards that threaten us - all the envy and intrigue and disease and evil that could snuff out our existence. Our survival in spite of these challenges to our existence is the result of geulah, the constant, protective involvement of Hashem in our lives.

R. Shmuel bar Nachman observes [3] that parnasah is of greater consequence than geulah. In our pesukim, the latter is attributed to an angel; the former is associated with Hashem Himself, apparently unwilling to delegate the task to one of His messengers.

Perhaps we can explain his teaching in the following way. This daily geulah, the bubble of protection that surrounds the fortunate person chosen by Hashem to make it to the finish line, is part of an entire pattern. Some people call it fate or destiny. At its core is the undeniable fact that an individual cannot emerge from the maze of dead-ends and pitfalls without serious protection. This protection is so basic to existence, that it must precede parnasah. For an individual (or community or nation, for that matter!) to survive, it needs to be endowed from the very beginning with a complement of protectors. From the moment that Hashem determines that an individual will survive, or a nation will exist - that it is their "destiny" or "fate" to remain functional - He provides it with the proper conditions and tools to escape fatal disturbance. Seen this way, parnasah fuels the activity of something, but geulah insures the very existence of the thing that needs to be fueled.

When we step back and contemplate how fortunate we are to simply exist - how improbable our existence really is - we gratefully acknowledge His decision to have created us. We acknowledge as well all the protection we have needed to have made it to a given moment. We call it a malach, which means in this context a messenger sent by Hashem. We acknowledge that the source of our bundle of protective elements is G-d Himself; whatever is working for us does so not randomly, but because He engineered it.

The malach, then, is the entire pattern of how Hashem has ordered our survivability. Yaakov notes here the contrast between his life-pattern and that of his brother, Esav. For Esav to survive, much was required of him. He was called upon to rely upon his own strength and sword. Yaakov, by contrast, was allowed by His Creator to contribute minimally, but to be carried through the difficulties of life by Hashem's agents.

This, then, is Yaakov's prayer for his grandchildren, directed at Hashem and no other. "May the malach that guides your futures be the same as guided mine. May your fate and destiny be similar to mine - living through all moments of life, the good and the not so good, with G-d doing the heavy

lifting, and you gratefully acknowledging His protection as you do more coasting than pedaling.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 48:15-16
 2. Bereishis Rabbah 20
 3. Loc.cit.
-